

CANADIAN PLURALISM: THE VIEW OF AN OUTSIDER INSIDE

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by

HENRY BEISSEL

I wish this session had been called "Canadian Pluralism: Views from Outside". After thirty-five years inside the country it takes the rhetorical dexterity of a lawyer or a politician to be able to claim plausibly that one can offer a view "from abroad". Unless, of course, Erich Koch, when he invited me to speak to you, had in mind my residence on the Eastern fringes of Ontario, halfway between Cornwall and Hawkesbury, which does lie, I am acutely aware, well outside the geographical heartland of Canada whose borders are determined by what you can see with a pair of binoculars from the top of the CN Tower on a misty day. As a man from Glengarry I am, in that Toronto perspective, a voice from abroad.

If the session had been called "Views from Outside", Michael Ignatieff might be said to have offered us the view of an "Insider outside" as I propose to share with you the view of an "Outsider inside". That I am as surely and as firmly part of this country as any of you is hardly debatable. I made it my home from the moment I arrived. Indeed, the world of my childhood quickly became so alien to me that it seemed to belong to another life, and I dated it B.C., Before Canada. My immigration here was in a profound sense a rebirth for me and measuring my age from the year of arrival was more than vicarious rejuvenation. English became my mother tongue - though my mother didn't speak it - and I acquired a new self.

And yet I am an outsider. Like it or not, we are each the sum total of our experiences, even though we all have some that we would prefer at least to forget, if not to undo. There can be no sanity without the acknowledgment and integration of every aspect and phase of our lives. There were years when I wanted to forget my childhood. But my childhood would not forget me. Night after night I woke up in a sweat from nightmares filled with the horrors of war. You see, much of my childhood was spent in air raid shelters, praying that the bombs would miss our house, watching the city of my first birth slowly turn into a heap of rubble under which thousands of people, some of them friends and family, were buried, crushed or burnt

to death. Of Cologne's original population of 800 000 in 1939, there were 40 000 left at the end of the war, and I was one of them, all of us living like rats in underground holes and smouldering ruins, pounded day and night by American and British bombers for the principal if not the exclusive purpose of terrorizing women and children. They terrorized me alright. I still cannot hear certain alarm sirens without my nervous system going into mild shock along the scars of certain memories.

There was also the shock and shame of coming to consciousness with the realization that I was born to a civilized nation that had committed the atrocities of Auschwitz and Belsen. Undoubtedly it was that from which I wanted to get away when I left Germany at the first opportunity, trying to put as much distance as possible between ^{such} incomprehensible cruelty and myself. I sure needed Canada. As a place to escape to, and as a space in which to reconstruct myself. Europe seemed doomed and I wanted a future. In the calm social and political waters of Canada those early wounds have healed and my childhood has become an integral part of myself, painful yes, but providing an optic that has made some invisible patterns of history visible. It took the better part of twenty years, but observing and examining the events of this century from the vantage point of a country at the periphery of the political storms of our time, I have been able to reconcile myself with my parents, and that means with the nation of my origin. It has become clear to me that the Nazi barbarities were not an essentially German phenomenon but are part of a mountain of horrendous exhibits in the courtroom of history by which our species stands condemned over and over again, and that especially our own century, which excels at so many things, also excels in barbarity. Nothing is more human than man's inhumanities. Such was my great disillusionment, but it carried me beyond petty nationalisms and perverse racisms to an acceptance of my share of the human lot and a more sober assessment of our potential for evil. This country doesn't sustain illusions easily and we are all the better for it.

I have indulged in these personal remarks not in order to inflict on you my biography, but because I regard my own case as archetypal of the Canadian immigrant. Change the names and faces, substitute dates and places -- and you have the portrait of millions of people who came here to escape - to escape harsh economic conditions, intolerable social restrictions, political terror and persecution, or just a soulless existence without hope. To them Canada was the land of opportunity -- the opportunity to live creatively, in freedom and with dignity, and to shape a future for their children. "Who in the world needs Canada?" Well, there are millions out

there around the globe who need a country that keeps its doors open to those determined to escape inhuman conditions. Because ours is a time of unprecedented barbarities. The planet is rife with genocide. Persecution on grounds of race and religion -to say nothing of political ideologies - is the norm now rather than the exception in many parts of the world. Add to that the perpetual state of war into which we have slipped so naturally that we regard this as an era of peace which we wish to preserve. In fact, in the past four decades of peace, there have been well over 150 wars around the world in which more than fifty million people have been killed. Add further: famine in Africa and parts of India as well as other natural and man-made catastrophes and you understand why this is the age of refugee camps where millions of men, women and children, desperate, homeless, subsist on hand-outs in a world that no longer wants them. As the song says, tears are not enough. What they need is a country with a large enough spirit and geography to offer them a new life. They need Canada - a country with a generous immigration policy.

In return, our immigrants contribute something to this country that the world needs at least as badly as an open door. It grows from seeds packed away inside them. They all carry it - that invisible package marked P-A-S-T, filled with, among other things, the pains and sufferings that drove them from their homes and homelands. It's been part of the meagre belongings with which every settler has arrived on the shores of this land. By coming here they broke with their past and many tried to forget it in exchange for a commitment to the future. But the past won't let go of you until its lessons become part of your life, and the lessons of suffering are compassion, tolerance and humility. It could not be otherwise but that this gigantic legacy of suffering should have had a share in forging our national character. For we are a nation of immigrants. They -we- have imported the experience and knowledge of man's inhumanity to man to this country for three or four centuries now, slipped it unnoticed past immigration officers and customs officials, and deposited it in the collective unconscious along with their determination to temper their cruel and destructive impulses, to do better than the societies they left behind. The shared pain and despair that brought our immigrants here is the soil in which those softening agents grow without which it is impossible for people of different temperaments and talents, different persuasions and pursuits, different languages and customs, different races and religions to live together harmoniously and productively - as they do in Canada.

If, then, it is in the very nature of immigration to act as a selective process that assures the birth of a pluralist society, is what I've claimed for Canada equally true of that other great immigrant nation in our hemisphere - the United States? The answer is Yes and No. Of course, the United States constitute a pluralist society in which all ^{the} creeds and colours mingle that we have in Canada, if in a different mix. But there is a difference, and I regard it as fundamental. It surfaces in many ways. It's a commonplace, for example, to say that as a social entity the United States is a 'melting pot' and we are a 'salad bowl'. Leaving aside whether or not the metaphor is correct, it is significant that our southern neighbours like to think of themselves as a 'melting pot' and we don't. Because the 'melting pot' is an image of homogeneity; it reflects a desire for conformity and that, in turn, is a manifestation of what one might call ideological singularity - the idea that there is, or the wish that there be, a single social scenario superior to all others and therefore morally binding on all people. Idealism always turns into dogmatism. It is no accident that the McCarthy witchhunt of yesteryear, which dramatically demonstrated the narrow limits of social tolerance in the United States, was, unlike a lot of other things, unable to spread northward across the border.

In trying to understand the source of this difference it's necessary to remember that along with the memories of past sufferings, every immigrant brings his hopes, aspirations and expectations. It is, in fact, his belief in the possibility of a better world that prompts him to immigrate in the first place. This belief can take two basic forms. One is the conviction that with effort and understanding, human suffering can be reduced and the quality of life improved. The other is the belief in a paradise on earth - the belief that with enough intelligence and application everything is possible and that history is the slow path of humanity towards an ultimate state of absolute justice, freedom and equality. This romantic idealism is the loom on which the social fabric of the United States is spun. It's the source of its splendour and its strength - the ebullient spirit of enterprise and optimism, the creative vitality and energy as well as the magnanimity of its moral commitments -- all qualities that have made the U.S. the great nation that it is. But it's also the source of its weaknesses and failures -- the bigotry of fundamentalists, the naive ruthlessness of its economy, its superman complex, its messianic delusions and its military prowess. Although such weaknesses and strengths are not unknown in Canada, they are alien to our national character.

The reason is that immigrants to Canada generally arrived with more modest expectations and ambitions. They were not looking to recover a lost paradise, but

x were content to live in the freedom of open spaces, earn a living wage, enjoy a decent standard of living and know that they were working for themselves - more or less - and their children who could be expected to have a brighter future. The selective process that sent the immigrant with utopian baggage south of the 49th parallel and the ameliorists north, is rooted in the history of the settlement of the two nations -- the one propelled by the Pilgrim Father syndrome that made colonization a struggle of the forces of goodness against the forces of evil, at the end of which lay the promise of the City of God which, for less pious minds, became a city of gold; the other laboriously following the retreat of the beaver in the service of distant kings whose pragmatic and mundane objectives militated against grandiose schemes and called for men willing or forced to serve in the winds of shifting loyalties and betrayals at English or French courts.

But there has to be another factor to account for the difference in mentality between Americans and Canadians, otherwise it would be impossible to understand why we, unlike our neighbour, never shook off the colonial yoke. We outgrew it, perhaps; or it became too troublesome for the masters to maintain and they took it off us, but we never revolted and conquered our freedom. The reason is our climate. There is a tendency to underrate the effect of the climate on the character of a people. I am convinced that Canadians are what they are primarily because of our winters and that if the United States as a whole experienced the same winters as ours they wouldn't have gone to Vietnam, they wouldn't be financing the overthrow of the government of Nicaragua, and they wouldn't be preparing for the Armageddon of Star Wars. For upwards of six months of every year nature around us is, to all intents and purposes, dead. Frozen rigid or buried under half a continent of snow, it stares at us with bleak, expressionless eyes. The animals have gone south or into hibernation. The human animal falls back on survival strategies that tax its capacities to the limit, and sometimes beyond. For more than half of our lives we are thus obliged to confront daily the fragility of life, our own perishability, the merciless indifference of nature, and the futility of grandiose ambitions in the face of the eternal return of the same seasonal cycle of birth and death. Not even to the wildest imagination can our winter wasteland resemble paradise, or sustain the hope that it might ever be turned into one. Isolated in the cocoon of fur boots, fur hats, fur coats, mittens, ear muffs and nose bags, we are left alone with our mortality to contemplate the vanity of all things.

Thus the annual and visceral experience of the Canadian winter reenforces those traits in our character which the immigrant smuggles into the country under

cover of the painful memories he wants to forget. In other words, winter makes us more compassionate, more tolerant, and more humble. By the same token, the amiable climate between Florida and California encourages the hubris of a super-power and its peoples' Cinderella dreams. The movement of American thought and perception is linear, progressive; time for them is a gradual ascent to some ultimate ecstasy or apotheosis. We don't believe in ecstasies or exaltations. The Homeric circle is the mythic pattern of our experience. Life is a journey that returns to its beginnings. There are things to be righted, as Odysseus did when he returned to Ithaca, but there is no place for utopias here, and the joys of life are in the living: the journey is what matters, not our destination.

The traumas of the immigrant's life BC, combined with our winters, are the source of our weakness. They make us conservative, unenterprising, non-committal, over-cautious and under-confident, passive, perhaps even cynical at times, and dull. But they are also the source of our strength. We don't consider ourselves superior to anyone, individual or nation; we distrust evangelists, be they of the religious, the political or the commercial kind. Levesque failed in his attempts to lead the people of Quebec into the chauvinist paradise he offered them as a panacea for their social ills. We lack the sense of messianic mission that continues to delude many nations, large and small, and always leads to bloodshed and persecution. ^{we have no Canadian way of life we wish to export,} We don't have a truth we consider binding for all; ^{we have no} designs on anyone's economy or territory. Our experience teaches us that there are many valid ways of looking at the world, that one must be skeptical of absolutes and generous with compromises, that survival calls for mutual assistance and cooperation, and that we must respect and cherish the differences between us because they are our true human wealth. In other words, we are temperamentally and ideologically committed to pluralism. We practice it at home and abroad. And that, I submit, is what the world needs more than anything else today - the spirit of tolerance, compassion and cooperation which we embody collectively, though we may be found wanting in the practice of it individually. Given the lunacy of our nuclear arms race, that spirit may be the only hope for the species to survive.

You will not have missed the irony of my standing here, a Canadian voice, holding up for emulation by the whole world the Canadian virtue of humility. A very un-Canadian posture and I should be profuse with apologies. But I am unrepentant. After all, I am not suggesting that this country is a model of perfection.

I am not naive enough to think that there is no racism or discrimination here. I have experienced plenty of it myself to know better. Especially, third-, fourth- and fifth-generation immigrants occasionally use that accident of their birth to establish some kind of superiority. Our native people, and individuals with easily identifiable racial differences know how discriminatory we can be. They know of our hypocrisy. I am troubled also by recent courtcases, ostensibly to curtail hate propaganda, which suggest that the limits of our tolerance are narrowing. But all of these are individual cases; at least they are not characteristic of Canada. I invite you to survey in your mind other nations with a comparable multi-cultural and multi-ethnic demography and evaluate their social harmony. You will quickly understand why Canada, for all our shortcomings, can be an example to the world. From coast to coast, people of every imaginable race and religion, colour and custom, ethnic or national origin, language and loyalty, live side by side as friends and neighbours. In the Franco-Scottish setting of my Glengarry abode my pharmacist is a Pakistani married to a Greek; my doctor is from Trinidad and his wife English; my neighbour in one direction is a Dutch painter, next door to a Hungarian couple, and in the other a German with a Québécoise wife; next to them an extraordinary couple, the husband of Italian origin, that has adopted some twenty children, almost all from Asia, from as far away as India, Korea and Malaysia, making my rural route a miniature United Nations. And that's what Canada is - a United Nations in action - a concave mirror of the Family of Man on its best behaviour. And we're determined to keep it that way. We are perhaps the only nation in the world with a Ministry of Multi-culturalism whose single-minded purpose is to foster the various cultures of which this country is composed. That's a far cry from the homogeneity of a melting pot. Ours is the only nationalism that may still be justifiable in the emerging new world order - because it's really a commitment to internationalism.

Nothing is more badly needed than the lesson that, like individuals in a society, the nations of the world can coexist and survive only on the basis of compassion, tolerance and humility. Perhaps we should start exporting the Canadian winter.